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Paul Yamada Interview

Bryan Nolte
bryabrynnnolte@gmail.com

Interviewer: Bryan Nolte
Artist: Paul Yamada
Location: In person, Chicago, IL
Date: March 1, 2016

Portrait of Paul Yamada by Laura Kina
oil on canvas, 48x36", 2004
Private collection New York

Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2016 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.

BIO: Independent scholar and cultural critic Paul Yamada has spent forty years in different areas of the music business, in the midwest and the east. A founding editor of the pioneering rock zine *Terminal Zone* (1976-78), Paul has written on blues, rock, soul, jazz, and avant garde music. In addition, Yamada has written on cinema, art, and theater for a wide variety of local publications in Chicago, St. Louis and Washington DC. He has consulted for National Public Radio, the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution, as well as the Washington DC Performing Arts Society and Chicago area (name of theater). His current projects include a Chicago project, *Wholesome*, which will include music revues, essays, visual arts and streamed radio. Bio from: http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Writer/paul-yamada

Interview Transcript:

Bryan Nolte: I would first like to ask you about where and when you were born, your background, and a little bit about the environment that you grew up in.

Paul Yamada: I was born in 1954, St. Louis Missouri, to Mas Yamada and Marjorie Ann Lehmann. I am a 'hapa'--I really consider myself that--and I have really strong ties to both the Midwest and then Washington DC, growing up in a predominantly lower middle class, white majority from first grade and then a Jewish-majority from fifth grade through high school. Throughout my early life, I was what you would probably call a prodigy child, and I was--I wouldn't say pressured by my parents--but I was pushed in the direction to pursue a career and degree in biochemistry or similar science. But it didn't take long for them to see that my interests were somewhere else. I did pretty well in that area too. I brought home probably the only blue ribbon that science division got in grade school. It was right around this time that I started to write. This set me apart from everyone else, kind of as trouble maker and people either really liked me or just plain didn't like me.

BN: How much of your work would you say originates from your start as a musician and independent artist from this period in your life?

PY: I think it wasn't so much the experience of a mixed race child, but the journey of growing up in white suburbia, as kind of like an outsider looking in--if that makes sense. This was really the experience as you call it as an artist and critic. I also took a lot of enrichment art programs and classes through grade school, and I also really started to listen to the music that I got into. This was a mix of avant garde, rock, jazz and blues. I also got into the early disco scene, but I really got started by studying studio art, the classics, oil, watercolor and Asian block prints.

BN: What initially drew you to your media and style within the context as an artist?

PY: I had always been interested in my Japanese heritage. It really started when I was just fascinated by the ritualistic and repetitive motions of the block print changing colors and also different forms. I really got into classical figures too, such as Van Gogh and Monet along with oils and pastels. I remember being fascinated by the textures of their work and pieces. I was actually kicked out of a gallery once for almost touching a Van Gogh piece, that's how deep my interest or I guess, fascination went. I've had for most of my career and ever since I got started, the view or stance of an outsider looking in, a good example is when I wrote for the school newspaper. There were not only several social and political differences between me and the other members the school newspaper, but also with the subjects that I was writing about. Like this one time I wrote a really scathing article regarding the school football team, and the school board and athletics department told me that I was one of the first authors to point out that the school's athletic strengths lay in swimming, and for lack of a better term, the football team was just terrible in competitive terms.

BN: You have been in the music business forty years in different areas of the music business in the Midwest and the East. Could you elaborate on the pioneering rock zine *Terminal Zone* (1976-78)?[1]

PY: *Terminal Zone*, actually is just something from my own experience in the industry for 40 years. But I'm going to be honest with you, when it started out, it was more of an experimental thing that I started in the University with a few of my roommates, but did not turn out altogether successfully. What it did allow for was a chance for my works, which I knew would not be published anywhere else but there by the standards of the 1970s. This project was considered outlandish as opposed to what was already out at the time. The pieces were actually seen almost as "fan zines," which to an extent they kind of were. The projects started as early as 1973. The whole project was actually considered a response--it was our response to mainstream culture and the mainstream media as well as a criticism for what existed at the time. This was really a chance to publish my own magazine and produce a viable alternative to what already existed at the time, and to also say what many viewed as a popular or outlandish. By a manifesto standpoint, the magazine was not altogether a success but it did explore the nature of rock, where it came from, and where it was headed. In a piece that Robert Christgau ran in the *Village Voice*, he basically referred to the whole project as a fan scene, and to add insult, referred to the project and myself, as pseudo-intellectual.

BN: You are particularly well known for your writings on blues, rock, soul, jazz, and avant garde music. Would you mind elaborating more on these works and related projects? In your 1979 article "David Bowie: From *Low* to *Lodger*"[2] in the *New York Rocker* you referred to David Bowie as, "innovative and creative, but he is not a creator, not an innovator"; also, comparing and contrasting the vocal and musical styles of his albums from *Low* and *Lodger*. *Lodger* received relatively poor reviews on its original release. *Rolling Stone* calling it, "one of his weakest... scattered, a footnote to *Heroes*." In your essay, you say that the songs are, "ordinary by Bowie's recent standards; they say little, have slight content, and hide behind exotic and foreign circumstances." Could you describe briefly what these circumstances are?

PY: Well I think that the decline of Bowie's musical incentive can be heard in the album *Heroes*, this is mainly because though he had intended to do something thematically heroic yet delivered a blasé performance. It's really important too when you're looking thematically at albums such as *Low*, *Lodger* and *Heroes* presents a low and Bowie's career during the early days of the 1970s. I mean, even though *Rolling Stones* said that here was in essence a footnote compared to *Low*. I don't think that there is a comparison when discussing the two albums. *Low* is a much more developed album in my opinion, and one of Bowie's best. Towards the end of the 60's, I

[1] Example from *Terminal Zone* spring 1977. http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/essaying-ithe-sound-of-the-cityi-gillett-and-after

[2] Paul Yamada, "David Bowie: From Low to Lodger," *New York Rocker*, 1979. http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/david-bowie-from-ilowi-to-ilodgeri

think, up to that point his best album was *Man Who Sold the World*. This seemed to expose Bowie's more hard rock side at a time when the hard rock scene was just emerging.

BN: Do you think you can give any comment to the legacy of David Bowie?

PY: A lot of that has to do with the time of Bowie's emergence on the scene. I think people today who were around then, or people who just don't know, that he was called a f**. When you're discussing the references to homosexuality in Bowie's single, *The Boys Still Swing*, which was seen as reactionary. In my humble view, this is what sets Bowie apart from pop artists of the time.

Also it has these distinctions and commentaries [his reviews], which gained me some notoriety as a musical critic, musician, and creative artist. Really all I can say on the legacy of Bowie is that it was truly remarkable the way that an artist like that could make the leap from popularity from a popular British artist, to popular international artist. Also, that the lasting legacy of Bowie is to shift people's view of those in society or of how others have used music to bring people from different walks of life and experiences together.

BN: You have been consulted for National Public Radio, the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution, as well as the Washington DC Performing Arts Society and Chicago area. Could you go into detail about these collaborations?

PY: Well I wrote for the *New York Rocker* for a few years, and then personal matters caught up with me, and then professional events followed me then I moved to Washington D.C. to be a consultant for National Public Radio, the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution. So after I wrote several pieces for National Public Radio, I went through an acrimonious divorce with NPR and took another job offer to be a consultant for local artists and also to write as a dramatic critic for different columns and art journals. This was not the case all at once however, when I got here you know how many papers and magazines hired me —none. When I got here in Chicago my reputation followed me and on more than one occasion when applying as an applicant for several newspapers and magazines. It was really another point in my career of being an "outsider," and it was really intensified by 9/11 and this sense of xenophobia fearing the "other." I was having a severe sense that I was an interloper looking inward.

BN: One of your current projects include a Chicago project, *Wholesome*,[3] which will include music revues, essays, visual arts and streamed radio could you expand on this?

PY: Oh yeah, I actually found my place here in Chicago interviewing local Asian-American artists, and reviewing local and alternative artists and genres as well. This really is what led me to my newest and currently on-going project of *Wholesome. Wholesome* is an entirely Chicago

[3] *Wholsome* http://wholso.me/radio

based arts project that came together to support photographer-artist Dave Rucins and has spread to music and print as well, and I really have gotten great opportunities from it, like all my weekly on-line radio shows as wholso.me/radio. *Wholesome* fits with what has been my main position toward popular art, music and culture, which is that if we cannot think and groove at the same time, all hope is lost.

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[NOTE: *The answers were sent via e-mail on March 16, 2016 in response to follow up interview questions from Professor Laura Kina.]*

Laura Kina: I want to follow up more with you about your contributions to *Discover Nikkei* and involvements in Chicago's Asian American art scene. What follows are some standard questions we ask all of our participants, "Do you ever address Asian American identity, themes or histories in your work? If so, please give a specific example."

Paul Yamada: Not directly, though I was persuaded to write some articles about my family and my perceptions of them, especially my parents, in a hapa or mixed race context by people at *Discover Nikkei*.[4] I also wrote some pieces for the JACL locally that were profiles of Japanese American artists, Yasuhiro Ishimoto and Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and then, after a long time, when I became acquainted with his work, local artist Ray Yoshida.[5] You were fairly instrumental in introducing me to Yoshida.

LK: Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian American or have you ever been labeled as an "Asian American artist"?

PY: No, the closest I got to that was working with Allen Sermonia and his dueEast Theater Company.[6] Not being white was often lurking beside my work experiences and perhaps challenging my work and career, but not so much directly. In a way, not being white and mainstream made it much easier to have profound interests in African American art and music and culture and to have perspectives that are not "white" and not African American, either. I think that sometimes my being branded in pop music and culture circles as an intellectual, or as Dean Bob put it, a "pseudo intellectual", has had some ethnic tinge to it, as well. If only based on narrow stereotypes perhaps connected to that model minority bs. But I never had any problem or

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[4] Paul Yamada. "When There Was No 'Hapa'." *Discover Nikkei*, April 29, 2010. http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2010/4/29/when-there-was-no-hapa/

[5] Paul Yamada. *Discover Nikkie*: "Pictures Worth 1,000 Words," Dec. 1, 2009. http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2009/12/1/yasuhiro-ishimoto/;"Profile: Yasuo Kuniyoshi," May 1, 2010. http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2010/1/5/yasuo-kuniyoshi/; "Ray Yoshida." June 13, 2013. http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2013/6/13/ray-yoshida/.

[6] Paul Yamada did all the music design for *Seven Out*, written by Keith Uchima and produced by dueEast Theatre Company in 2004 at Stage Left Theatre in Chicago. http://www.aatrevue.com/Old/dueEast0404.html

discomfort being associated with an Asian American theater scene. One other aspect is that I also do not fit into the west coast or Cali Asian American thing, and because of that I think a lot of Asians I've met over the years do not know what to make of me, this southern-midwestern person who craves grits, can talk like a resident of the rural upper delta, knows a lot of blues and r&b and so on.

LK: Was identifying as "Asian American artist" something that was also important to you personally? Please explain.

PY: Growing up in the 1960s had very different textures and aspects and psychology than we have now. So it wasn't so much an "identification" thing as a "realization" thing and trying to be comfortable with my own face and very different life in a, for the most part, "white world." At some point I simply had to accept and appreciate all the things about me and my life that were different and get something from that, and rest assured that I was not ever going to be like the popular kids in school. Since teachers and administrators and my parents had pushed me as early as first grade, and since this was something of an honor, even if I was not all that interested, I found ways of coping then and simply had to adapt, but to a much wider set of prospects. I needed to find ways of pursuing what drove me, interested me, made me tick, and still manage not to get singled out and picked on all the time, and hope there was some positives out there, like dating and socializing and all of that. As I got older some of it became easier, some not, because with sophistication, it became clear that a lot of non-Asians look at "us" and see something exotic, see something that really isn't there, and I really wanted to find ways to get around that, subvert that and be embraced as different, unique, and with feelings and thoughts and creativity, a lot to offer, even if that wasn't always acceptable to the "crowd."

END.

To read more about Paul Yamada or to read his writings visit:

http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Writer/paul-yamada

http://wholso.me/radio/djz